

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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**MEDICARE DRUG PROGRAM ENROLLMENT BEGINS TODAY, CONFUSION AMONG BENEFICIARIES REMAINS HIGH**

WASHINGTON - Today, U.S. Representative Pete Stark (D-CA, 13th) noted the high level of confusion associated with the new Medicare drug program. Medicare beneficiaries can begin to enroll in the new Medicare drug programs today.

**“In the East Bay, senior citizens and people with disabilities will have to choose from more than 50 plans,” Stark said. “Unfortunately, the quality and quantity of unbiased, educational information has been sorely lacking and recent studies have shown most beneficiaries are not planning to enroll and do not understand the program well. Given that confusion, it's imperative we protect beneficiaries as they make their decisions. That's why I've worked with my colleagues to offer the Medicare Informed Choice Act, to give beneficiaries the time they need to make the best decision.”**

Under current law, most Medicare beneficiaries must sign up for a drug plan by May 15th, 2006 to avoid penalties. Also, once someone signs up for a plan, most beneficiaries will be unable to change plans until 2007, while plans can change the benefits they offer once they offer 60 days' notice.

Because of the confusion already being seen among senior citizens and people with disabilities, Stark and U.S. Representative Jan Schakowsky (D-IL, 9th) have authored a bill, the Medicare Informed Choice Act (H.R. 3861), to extend the enrollment period through all of 2006 and allow beneficiaries to make a one-time change in plans during the first year. Senator Bill Nelson (D-FL) has offered companion legislation in the Senate (S.1841).

**“No one should feel pressured into making a bad decision,” Stark added. “Our bill would allow beneficiaries to take their time, check their facts and know their options without being rushed to choose.”**